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AUTHOR	Teague, Deborah Coxwell
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ABSTRACT

Much has changed in the life of an educator and daughter of a Southern Baptist minister since her early days when believing seemed so simple. One thing that has never changed is her love for a good story. The educator thinks that the reason she majored in English, eventually became a writing teacher, and now spends much of her time training and working with writing teachers is directly related to her love for stories. She argues, as Joe Trimmer does in "Narration as Knowledge: Tales for the Teaching Life," that while stories are wonderful, they are also much more than that. Stories convey knowledge and can serve an important role in teacher training. At Florida State University, new writing teaching assistants take summer preparatory teacher training courses in which experienced teaching assistants visit the class and share their experiences, their failures, and their successes in their first-year writing classrooms. From these stories, a kind of insight is gained that would otherwise probably be missed. (NKA)

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Deborah Coxwell Teague
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The Role of Stories in Teacher Training: Using Stories to Reinforce Theory and Examine Pedagogy

I've never been particularly fond of lectures, even those delivered with the best of intentions, and growing up the daughter of a Southern Baptist minister, I heard more than my share. In everyday life, my dad is a quiet, soft-spoken, gentle man who rarely raises his voice, but on Sunday mornings behind his pulpit and before his audience of faithful, churchgoing folk, he is often transformed into a very different being. His voice booms as he delivers his messages on the damnation of the wicked, the certain punishment they will receive for their moral transgressions, and the fiery depths into which they will be cast. When I was growing up, church attendance was not a matter of choice for me; when the doors were open, I was there. And that was usually okay. I loved to daydream and did lots of it while Dad delivered his Sunday morning lectures/sermons. When my dad lectured on the ways of the wicked and the certain punishment they could expect, my mind was more often than not a million miles away, but the fiery depths part always brought me back—partly because I knew I was guilty of more than a few moral transgressions, but primarily because when he got to that part, his lecture turned into something else—it wasn't a lecture at all—it was a scary, frightening, but in its own way, wonderful story. You see, after my dad described in awful detail the horror of those fiery depths and the pain and suffering experienced by those who landed there, he was always sure to point out that all one had to do to avoid that awful fate was believe and ask for forgiveness, and I knew I could do that. That was easy.

Much has changed in my life since those early days when believing seemed so simple, but one thing that has never changed is my love for a good story. In fact, I think the reason I majored in English and eventually became a writing teacher, and now one who spends much of her time training and working with writing teachers, is directly related to my love for stories. Stories can be fun; they can be heartbreaking and mesmerizing. They can be transforming. They can carry us away to another world. They allow us to be someone else and have experiences we could never have otherwise. In the introduction to his collection, *Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life*, Joe Trimmer states, "We became English teachers because we loved stories. We loved reading them, writing them, and talking about them. We loved the way they intensified our lives and helped us understand other lives" (x). I would like to argue, as Trimmer does in *Narration as Knowledge*, that while stories are wonderful, they are also much more than that—stories convey knowledge and can serve an important role in teacher training.

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At Florida State University, where I help train 100+ teaching assistants—the TAs—who teach our first-year writing courses, incoming graduate students who have accepted assistantships teach two sections of first-year writing or teach one section and tutor ten hours per week in our Reading/Writing Center. Those without previous experience teaching college-level writing arrive on campus in late June and begin teaching their own classes in late August. During this two-month interval, they are required to take two teacher-training courses: "Teaching English as a Guided Study" and "Teaching College English." I teach the latter. Our summer training courses are not easy. In fact, because the training is quite intense and TAs often wonder if they will survive the six-week period, many of then refer to the training as "boot camp." Our course goals for Teaching College English state that students "will examine current perspectives, theories, and directions in composition teaching, and…will also take a close look at composing processes." They will "study writers' and teachers' roles in the classroom, collaboration, and the relationship among speaking, writing, and reading" (Syllabus for LAE 5370). By the end of the six-week class, our teachers-in-training are expected to begin developing a teaching philosophy that synthesizes composition theory, their own teaching style, curricular requirements, and student needs. We discuss questions such as "What do we teach and why? What do we not teach and why? Who are our students? How do I respond to student writing and why? How do I evaluate student writing and why?" Our perspective teachers develop college teaching skills, knowledge of workshop formats, reading and response techniques, strategies for handling grammar and mechanics, and ways to teach invention and revision. They develop confidence and a repertoire of teaching strategies for college writing classrooms. To accomplish these goals, we read, research, and respond to current composition and pedagogical theory. We discuss articles such as Anne Gere's "Teaching Writing: The Major Theories," Patricia Bizell's "Composing Processes: An Overview," Rick Straub's "The Concept of Control in Teacher Response," and Peter Elbow's "Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking," to name just a few. Our perspective teachers lead class discussion on two assigned articles, intern in a section of ENC 1101 (the course they will be teaching in only a few weeks), keep a journal in which they reflect on their experiences in the ENC 1101 classroom, write a self evaluation at the end of the course, and all along the way hear a multitude of stories by teachers about teaching. And while we learn much from the articles, the internship, and the writing, we also learn from the stories.

Each week, experienced teaching assistants in our program visit our class and share their stories—their experiences—their failures and their successes in their first-year writing classrooms. Diane tells the story of, late in the semester, staying up all night studying for a History of the English Language Exam, sleeping through her alarm the next morning, arriving 20 minutes late for her first-year writing class, expecting the room to be empty, but instead, finding her 22 students working intently in their workshop groups. Among the lessons we learn from Diane is the one that students are full of surprises. While they frequently frustrate and beguile us, sometimes they come through in ways that make us proud to be their teachers.

Amy tells the story of her 18-year old first-year student, one of the best writers in her class, who was raped over Spring Break and was unable to return to the classroom for the

rest of the semester. She tells of how this young woman refused to report the atrocity or confide in her parents because if she had, her parents would have discovered that she had lied to them about where she was going the night the rape occurred. From Amy's story we learn that teaching first-year composition often involves more than helping students develop their writing skills. Because of the relatively small class size and the close relationships we often develop with students, we sometimes find ourselves privy to information with which we're not trained to deal. Amy's story teaches us the importance of our being aware of the professional sources available on our campuses to which we can refer students who need help we're not equipped to give.

I tell my story of Ron, my high school student who taught me about the relationship between reading and writing. Ron completely ignored me when I told my seniors to take out their *Warriner's Grammar* texts so that we could study the ambiguous rules that govern our language, yet he aced every grammar quiz I gave and wrote beautifully. While his classmates and I studied the grammar text, Ron read novels. He unconsciously absorbed the rules we labored over and gained knowledge along the way that *Warriner's Grammar* never offered us.

We read selections from *Narration as Knowledge* such as Chris Anson's poignant story "Beginnings," in which he tells of his early struggles as he learned, through trial and frequent error, how to effectively respond to student writing. We read Sondra Perl's painful, moving story, "Facing the Other," in which she describes her difficulty as a Jew teaching German teachers in Germany and teaches us that sometimes teaching writing involves more than we'd ever bargained for. We read Lad Tobin's "Reading about Death, Disease, and Dysfunction; or, How I Spent My Summer Vacations," in which he shares what he learned about the value of writing about the personal from the depressing stories his students submitted for enclosure in a book of student essays. And from these stories and many others, we gain a kind of insight—a kind of extremely valuable knowledge—that we would otherwise probably miss out on.

One day last week, Mike, one of the first-year TAs who was a student in our training classes last summer, came by my office in a tizzy. "Oh,
Dr. Coxwell Teague, I'm so glad I caught you. I can't believe what I did. I was just in the grad lounge and all the TAs were talking about the summer assignments they found in their mail boxes, and I realized I never turned my form in to you. I meant to—I filled it out—but I never got it to you, and now I don't know what I'll do. I was counting on teaching this summer. I know this is not your responsibility, but do you have any idea where I could get a job this summer? Oh, I just can't believe I did this. You know, what I've done is probably going to turn into one of those stories you tell in summer training about what happens when we don't turn in our forms to you."

I imagine Mike had forgotten much of what we studied in summer training, just as he had forgotten to turn in his summer teaching preference form, but he hadn't forgotten the value of a good story as a teaching tool.

Work Cited

Trimmer, Joseph F. *Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life*.

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